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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL PREPARING FOR CONFLICT ON MAY DAY

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¶1. (U) Conflicts between police and illegal protestors seem inevitable as both the government and labor groups have staked out firm positions with regard to May Day protests in Istanbul's Taksim Square. The Istanbul Governor had earlier denied labor groups' request for permission to march on Taksim Square, following a practice that began after May Day protests in 1977 resulted in 36 deaths and scores of injuries. Illegal protests in 2007, the 30th anniversary of the 1977 deaths, resulted in violent confrontations with the police and hundreds of arrests. On April 29, Prime Minister Erdogan refused to yield to union leaders' request to allow demonstrators to enter Taksim Square. A last minute compromise was quashed on the morning of April 30 as Interior Minister Sahin publicly upheld the protest ban.

¶2. (U) Two major labor unions--DISK and Kesk--have issued a joint statement that they "are determined to celebrate May Day in Taksim Square". According to press reports, these unions vowed to send 500,000 marchers to Taksim on May Day. Some commentators claim the government is reluctant to lift the protest ban fearing the gathering could turn into an anti-Justice and Development Party (AKP) rally since the ruling party recently passed a controversial social security package that reduced some worker benefits. The AKP government tried to reach out to labor by declaring May 1 as "Labor and Solidarity Day", but this gesture fell short of organized labor's demand the day become a national holiday.

¶3. (U) Since 1977, Turkey has banned May Day celebrations in Taksim Square where 36 people were killed when violence broke out during the rally. This ban was upheld largely without incident until 2007 when just under 1,000 people were arrested when protesters marched on the square despite having been denied protest permission (see reftel for details). Police responded with water canons and tear gas in an attempt to disperse the illegal demonstrators. The violence along with police barricades and security checkpoints jammed traffic throughout the city, creating a transportation nightmare for tens of thousands of commuters. As in 2007, permission has been granted for labor rallies in other Istanbul neighborhoods including major protest sites in the centrally located Kadikoy and Cagalayan districts.

¶4. (U) Istanbul Municipal and Provincial authorities have attempted to restrict access to Taksim by potential protestors on May 1 by cancelling all ferry service between the European and Asian side of the city until noon as well as cancelling metro, light rail and bus service to Taksim. Nearby primary schools in the Beyoglu, Sisli, and Kagithane districts will also be closed. The Consulate General has issued a Warden Message alerting locally resident American

citizens to the possibility of protests and traffic
disruptions. We will monitor the situation throughout the
day on May 1.

WIENER